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The cartographer's dilemma

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The Cartographer's Dilemma



1. Shrink Wrap City: If you listen closely you can hear a sucking sound.¹

Paul Guzzardo, designer and media activist

I'll start this with a call for an epistemological beachhead and rant against the shrink-wrapped city.

Lorens Holm, director, the Geddes Institute for Urban Research

Time to propose a new spatial practice, one that takes heed of the knowledge environment.

PG

I want the spotlight off of Larry Page and Sergey Brin _ those Google titans _ and flash it on Geddes and the City. So here's a Geddes quote.

*The general principle is the synoptic one, of seeking as far as may be to recognise and utilise all points of view and so to be preparing for the Encyclopaedia Civica of the future.*²

LH

And another.

*Town plans are thus no mere diagrams, they are a system of hieroglyphics in which man has written the history of civilisation, and the more tangled their apparent confusion, the more we may be rewarded in deciphering it.*³

PG

The dilemma in the tera-perabyte world is getting deciphering gear on the street. Without that *techné* the city is less and less a stage for knowledge creation and synthesis. We need new place making action plans. We need new interfaces on the ground linking the city space and data-landscapes. Place making that takes no heed of the evolving knowledge environment is no longer sustainable. If the end game is a sustainable city, the city has to be a knowledge generator. And without a street/data/scape interface _ new crossover nodes _ it's neither. Time is short. This brief should have been started twenty years ago. That's when the info-age began slamming us. But it never got written. Now the digital buckshot is coming at hyper-speed. And we've got a gaping hole in the

¹ Per creative common licensees - (left) jvidhee, (centre) Raymond Yee, and (right) be OH be.

² Patrick Geddes, *Cities in Evolution: An Introduction To The Town Planning Movement And To The Study Of Civics* (London: William & Norgate, 1915) p320

³ Patrick Geddes, *Cities in Evolution* (London: William & Norgate, 1949) new and revised edition, p170. This quote is not in earlier editions.

city. We're wedged between a data space and a hard place, and left with a shrink-wrapped something or other.

LH

For Geddes the evolutionist (student of Huxley), the city was an artifact in the continual evolution of intellect (bus shelters mark the city as a flow of people, manhole covers mark it as a flow of sewage.) For this reason he was conservative in his approach to the renovation of the city. He advocated 'surgical' interventions to destroy as little fabric as possible. *Tabula rasa* planning was intellectual suicide, tantamount to the loss of the library of Alexandria. We need to invent the spatial notation to mark the city as a flow of data and discourse.

PG

But a new tool set, a new systems approach is essential, or as Geddes would say "*the principle is the synoptic one*".



2. Geddes Game Board no.1⁴

LH

We need to develop a spatial system of form-types and grammar, and a strategy for location. In another register, it is not miles away from the question of the coherence of the city addressed by Aldo Rossi in his theory of types, or of Palladio in his pages of villa plan forms. What are the abstract principles, and what elements repeat endlessly in different circumstances? What are fixed and what contingent?⁵ How do we represent the

⁴ Image credit Lorens Holm

⁵ We have this formula – fixed and contingent - from my colleague Graeme Hutton.

city to ourselves as a flow of ideas, knowledge, love, money, political affiliations. **We are looking for nothing less than a new vision of coherence and cohesion on a par with Nolli's vision of Rome.** Nolli showed us that the city was an infrastructure of surfaces, continuous, plastic, inside-outside. The cartography that allows us to map the knowledge of the city back onto the city will not be a new map that replaces Nolli's (what Venturi sought to do), but a process, a recursive mapping process: continuous and without end – a Recursive Urbanism. Imagine an urbanism where a continually updating cartography replaces the static map. It is a technical process, what Mumford called *technics* (he posed man's *technic* outside against his Freudian inside).

PG

The question is: where are we going to get the crew to move towards this coherent vision? To get that *Nolli update*, place-makers have to rethink cultural precincts and "creative practices". The remix digerati have to be on the street. We don't want a generation secreted in clandestine places, shackled to screens and virtual sites. Or shunted to mutating gaming consoles, where buttons and a directional joystick rein the drift. They have to be on the ground navigating through the digital fog. That's the place to double, layer and go off in several directions. But they need gear to cut a path in the data maelstrom. They need way stations; to plot a course, and platforms to peer. But they don't have it. Place making has yet to respond to the sucking sound.

LH

We need mapping stations for collating the knowledge embedded in AND OUT OF the city, for writing new narratives and counter narratives, doctors' surgeries for surgery upon the city. It poses problems for strategies of location. Geddes proposed the Cities Exhibition as the place to collate local knowledge and put it into circulation. Each city was to have an Exhibition as a permanent civic institution along with courthouse, museum, etc. It was a necessary condition for participatory democracy, because you could not make informed decisions if you did not know the city you lived in, and its relation to the region, the country, the world....

PG

... and *its relation to* the virtual place, the blended space. The surgical insertion is the way to go. Slide the scope in. Think of them as mapping nodes that slip into what's already there. When it works you end up with ocular devices that peer through the digital fog, and that's not far from Geddes. Geddes's place making emerges out of the liminal world of Greek philosophers who played with comings and goings, ins and outs from caves. Geddes understood the city as a blended site. He was more than a student of Darwin/Huxley. He was an apprentice of those classical Greeks. The Geddesian playbook opens on the Greek *polis* where the first citizens - creatives - drifted and mixed things up. Good things happened there, like knowledge and synthesis. Our media environments have taken us _ and our blended selves _ back to these liminal places. Today we're still mixing and drifting but don't do much on the street. It's in a soft space, the virtual realm where we tell our stories and learn. If we can get back on the street, good things can happen in this here and now.

LH

What we are looking for is a cultural infrastructure for scoping the city. I call it *infrastructure* because – unlike Geddes Cities Exhibition - we need a cultural institution as ubiquitous dispersed and repetitious as phone booths, post boxes, public toilets, manholes, that creates a network of stations for reflecting upon the city and mapping

that new knowledge back onto the city. If we take Geddes seriously, the knowledge is already there, and it is about creating the moments for accessing it, reflecting upon it, and transmitting it to others. Instead of the media environment shadowing the city like an Other scene that mimics it in complexity draws off its energy, its civics, its intellectual life, can we not engage it to create a hybrid.⁶ Imagine local gallery + *QuestionTime* + webscape *congestion* (thanks Koolhaas) with link to local authority website (except that it might replace the local authority at least at the community level). It will be a hybrid media platform and public space showcase.⁷



3. St. Louis MediaARTS LAB: Polis Game Board no.2

PG

I played in that soft space in my MediaARTS lab. It was a blended place, a straddled one. It was on the street, a sort of polis update. The lab wrapped a windowed corner in downtown St. Louis. Artists used digital collage, remix to create new urban narratives, to map and re-mythologize the streetscape. The evening's digital amalgam/remix, was projected on screens and monitor walls facing the street. Subject matter included

⁶ For Freud, the Other scene was the dream, that landscape of unconscious desire, that was marked by an other spatial and temporal logic.

⁷ There is also interesting work on the city and media environments coming out of interaction design. See for instance: SJ O'Neill 'The Interactive Spectacle and the Digital Situationist', in *Exploration of Space, Technology and Spatiality: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. by P Turner, S Turner, E Davenport (Hershey, PA: Information Science Reference, 2008) And: SJ O'Neill 'Presence, Place and the Virtual Spectacle', in *Psychology Journal* special edition on *Space, Place and Technology: Human presence in mediated experiences*, ed. by L Gamberini, G Riva, A Spagnolli, Vol 3(2) (2005), p149-161, [http://www.psychology.org/pnj3\(2\)_space_place_and_technology.htm](http://www.psychology.org/pnj3(2)_space_place_and_technology.htm)

⁸ Image Credit Paul Guzzardo

meditations on art/science practice; the effect of information technology on social practice; 9/11; the millennium, comic books; Orwellian media culture. It was street theatre, a tool to advance synthesis and awareness, with the hope that it might lead to collective action. Then we collaborated on *laserlnet*. *laserlnet* was about mediating spaces and communities. Gallerygoers either side of a screen could communicate across it and trigger image and sound files that occluded it, from position points in the space.⁹



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there is a Digital Future Landscape Terrain...
                Future Landscape Terrain: fingerly, numeric, parcelled.
Digital         Landscape Terrain: imagined imminent immensity.
Digital Future  Terrain: a narrative scaped by the land.
Digital Future Landscape : a tussocked surface, rough going.
```

4. *laserlnet*: Cahokia Indian mound on the outside, digital platform on the inside¹⁰

LH

The stage is the street. We have to reclaim it as an agent against the programmed amnesia inherent in most city planning, which turns the city into a spectacle for tourism, for business, for raising tax revenues, above all for amusement and investment. Its hyper-real flythrough tropes turn the city into a display whose effect, intentional or otherwise, is to sedate us; to turn us away from the difficult issues confronting us, issues about our relation to our environment, built and natural, which, if we could reflect upon them, we would have a hope of solving. Need new spaces to confront bad times.

PG

How do we build a wiki on the street?¹¹ There is something happening 'off street' that draws me. It has money and smarts. It is computer gaming. And yes most computer games fall in that vast hyped hyper-bounce *blastscape*. This is a niche. It is called Serious Games and it has a Geddesian hum to it. Serious gaming emerges out of "deep game engine" architecture. Players move "in and out" of a trajectory, a sequence of domains. Serious game theorists examine game design in terms of the potential for

⁹ *laserlnet* (2006) was an installation in which a central screen had projected upon it the spaces that it divided. It was a collaboration between Guzzardo, Holm, John Bell, and Adam Covell, funded by the AHRC. It was installed in Centrespace in the University of Dundee's Visual Research Centre. Cf. Guzzardo and Holm, 'Is there a digital future landscape terrain' in Michael Spens, ed, *Landscape Architecture: Site-Non-Site*, special issue of *AD: Architectural Design*, 77:2 (2007). Cf. (<http://www.dundee.ac.uk/geddesinstitute/lasernet.htm>).

¹⁰ Image credit Lorens Holm and Paul Guzzardo.

¹¹ Wikipedia, an 'Encyclopaedia Civica of the future', went on line in 2001, eighty-six years after the publication of *Cities in Evolution*.

learning and literacy. Their sage is James Paul Gee.¹² When I read Gee it seems as if Geddes's *œuvre* devised for the city as a creative cauldron of progress and humanization has been hijacked to a gaming space. Polis-sequel has drifted to soft *semiotic domains*, a term within game engine architecture. The platform has switched, from city to game. The *lingua franca* of serious gaming _ issues of domain and social practice, effective participation, domains for multi-literacy, experiencing the world in new ways _ all share a jolting similarity to the Geddesian playbook. Like the one on the ground, it involves trajectories through a sequence of tableaux, places for lingering meditation, for thinking *flâneurs*. Intended or not these game theorists have appropriated Geddes' read of the city as platform for shared understanding and knowledge.

LH

But the team is playing in a virtual realm, and there is no indication that it is coming off that field. That's a problem. It involves more than discourse. It's also about money. The sustainable city and the serious game are both in search of new system platforms, platforms that are more than spectacle delivery shunts, new maps for a recursive urbanism. The barrier that separates city and game praxis needs to blend. We need collaborations, a profound rethinking of civics, planners and creative practices.

PG

Geddes understood the itch to game. The agonistic frontline for this biologist was the street. Geddes saw the arena on the street. It was the font for creative struggle, wakefulness and synthesis.

LH

Seems apt that 'the Dundee street' where Geddes spent twenty years teaching is home to Realtime Worlds¹³, the company that brought us *Grand Theft Auto* and now *All Points Bulletin*. Street maps and street fights, mixed and remixed by Scotland's digerati.

PG

The question is how can we grab the gaming phenomena and use it to transform civics? How do we graft it onto the street?

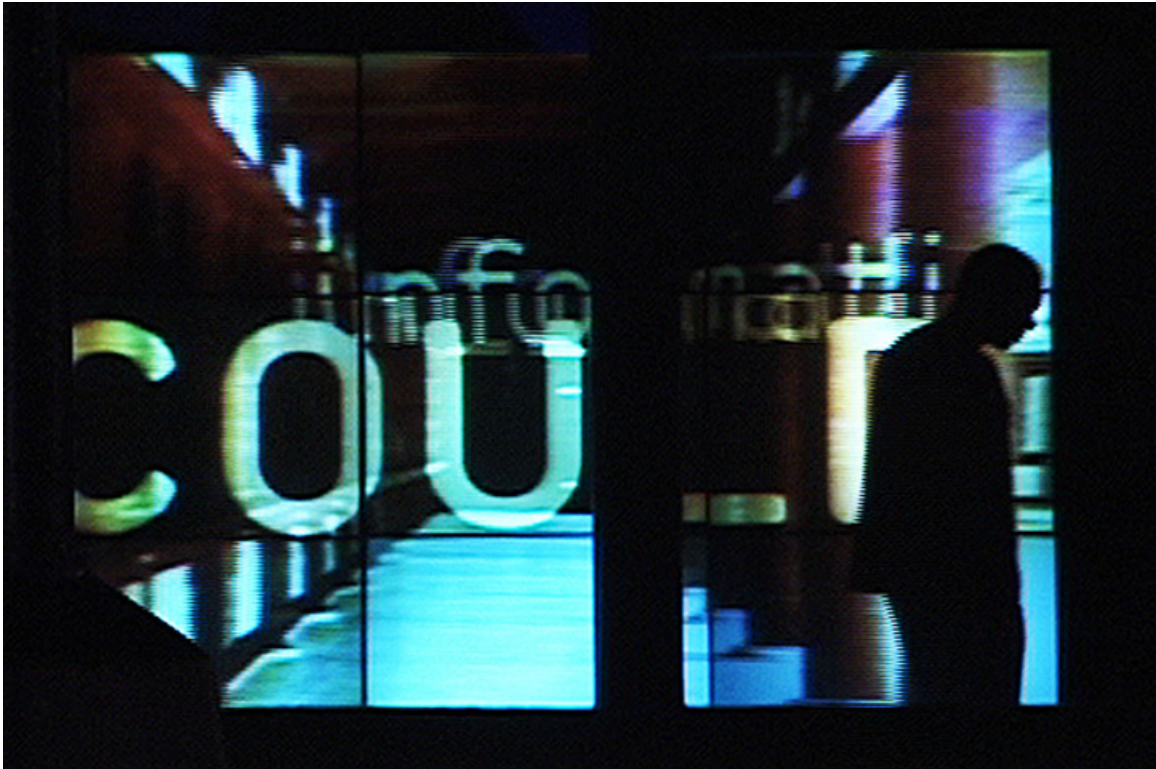
LH

Our editor says we are out of time. Let's save Geddes, the street and GTA/APB for the blog.¹⁴ We have fixed the coordinates, oriented a dialogue on cities. The point is that Geddes left us a tool chest packed with maps, maps to build platforms that glimpse ahead, assess what's coming, and maybe humanize this new place.

¹² James Paul Gee, *What Video Games Have To Teach Us – About Learning And Literacy* (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2003)

¹³ The Grand Theft Auto (GTA) franchise has had a significant impact on the medium of the videogame. It is now one of the most recognized video game brands on the market. All Points Bulletin (APB) also created by David Jones, is a massively multiplayer online video game based in urban sprawls and featuring two sides, Enforcement and the Criminals. Players may join either group. Cf. the APB website at <http://www.apbgame.com/>).

¹⁴ <http://www.dundee.ac.uk/geddesinstitute/cartographers.htm>



5. A Soft Space ¹⁵

25 Jan 2010
1996 words

¹⁵ Image Credit Paul Guzzardo